

please don't say i'm going alone by tozier

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Angst, Fluff, Fluff and Angst, M/M, ain't that just the way of the world, ok i guess it's also, that's it it's fluff

Language: English

Characters: Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Will Byers/Mike Wheeler

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-12-22

Updated: 2017-12-22

Packaged: 2022-04-03 14:56:30

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 1

Words: 7,224

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

College is coming faster than Mike or Will were prepared for, and they're holding on tightly enough to bruise.

please don't say i'm going alone

Author's Note:

hello!

welcome to my hell. these two have been my kryptonite since the first stranger things was released, but man, we got some heavy duty fodder in st2, didn't we folks?

song in the tin is ends of the earth by lord huron.

enjoy, friends!

So, Mike is going away to college. Tomorrow. And Will may or may not be freaking the hell out. He told Mike over a message on his home answering machine that he was too sick to say goodbye, giving a pretty impressive performance of a hacking cough. He's had his time to seriously regret it and now he's moved onto moping miserably. His mother has come in to check on him a grand total of seven times today and it isn't even 3:00 yet.

They've both been holding onto each other for dear life all summer, terrified to let each other go for more than a day or two. Of course, neither of them are saying their fears out loud. Instead, they're stewing in their neurosis and letting it overtake them. Will knows it isn't smart or healthy, and his therapist is having a field day trying to talk him down off the edge of a cliff every week. *But, Mary, he's leaving. For good. He isn't come back!* he cried to her. *Then why don't you tell him how you feel? What's the harm if he's leaving?* Will sighed harshly. *Mary, you don't understand.* And then had gone into a tirade about Mike's history of dating girls (well, girl) and Will's lack of dating girls for what felt like the thousandth time. This is an anxiety he knows like the back of his hand at this point, Mike's heterosexuality.

What is much more unfamiliar is the looming, quickly oncoming future of being without him.

Suddenly, there's a knock at Will's door as he's hiding under the covers with his thoughts and he somehow knows it isn't his mother. He sighs, doesn't even bother asking who it is, and simply says in a quiet voice he knows Mike is listening for, "Come in."

The door opens and there is Mike, standing in all his glory: nearly 6 feet tall, lanky with strong shoulders, in a striped shirt Will has seen before and a container in his hands. Will doesn't need to look at him to know most of this. Will knows Mike and Mike knows Will: the way it's always been. The way Will is terrified of it no longer being once they're separated.

Mike sees Will in less glory than he's used to, but still just as devastatingly beautiful. When Will gets sick, he gets very sick due to the fact that he cannot stand to have the heat on anymore to the point where there have been winters where the pipes in the Byers house have frozen. The boy is usually freezing to the touch, but Mike never minds. He never minds anything negative when it comes to Will and he's finally, finally figured out why.

Will is laying prone on his bed, hands clutching the thin blanket that's on top of him as they shake, maybe from the force of how hard he's holding on, maybe from nerves, Mike doesn't know. He's staring at the ceiling; he doesn't need to look to the doorway to know it's Mike, even though he's said nothing. Mike smiles wistfully at his sweating, shaking form, knowing that Will is so in-touch with the ones he loves that he knew Mike would be over today even though he left a message for him not to come due to his illness. He knew Mike couldn't bear to leave without saying goodbye. Mike isn't sure he can leave either way.

Mike steps into Will's bedroom and shuts the door slowly and silently, not wanting to alarm or disturb Will with unnecessary noise. Mike sits down next to him and puts down what he brought over on Will's bedside table. Will doesn't tell him not to, like he would if he were really sick, afraid he'll infect everyone he loves with his illness if they come close enough.

"So," Mike starts softly, head tilting towards Will's bedside table without breaking his gaze on Will's face, "word on the street is that you're sick."

"Yeah..." Will responds faintly, burning a hole through his cracked ceiling with how hard he's staring up at it. "Sick."

"Well, I made you some soup."

"You? Made soup?" Will smiles, still refusing to look at Mike directly, and instead bypasses him completely to look at the tupperware container filled with broth.

"Yeah, *Will*, I did!" Mike teases, affronted. "My mom helped! I forced her to!"

"Oh, yeah? How's it taste?"

"Why don't you try it yourself?" Mike offers with a grin but when he pulls out the spoon he brought in his pocket wrapped in napkins, he simply puts it on Will's nightstand. He knows Will won't eat it; at least not right now. He'll save it for later, when Mike is gone and he misses him. Will is sentimental like that.

Mike is right, and Will sighs, finally looking up at him. The look in his eyes spells out terror and his body looks even smaller underneath the sheets, but there's an electricity that passes through them when they make eye contact that Mike cannot deny any longer. The smile stays in place on Mike's face. With anyone else, with Joyce or Jonathan or Nancy or any of their friends, seeing Will shivering and scared like he was all those years ago, they would frown at him and coo and ask what's wrong. But Mike doesn't need to ask. He knows already: Will is just as afraid to be wrenched apart and break their delicately and tightly woven seams as Mike is. They've been tied together for so long, neither of them quite know who they are without the other.

"Hey," Mike offers, so quiet it's barely a whisper. Will purses his lips, as if he's fighting a smile that isn't right for the mood he's feeling, but he lets it take over anyway.

"Hey." Mike's hand is so close to Will's arm under the covers that his pinky finger is resting on it. He uses it to tap on Will's arm.

"You gonna come out from under the covers? Or are we building a

fort?" Will's grin widens and unfolds himself from the blanket, sitting up. He's wearing a plain t-shirt and plaid pajama pants. Mike thinks it's around 3:00 PM and Will hasn't even gotten out of his pajamas yet. His heart fissures and splits further down the middle than it was before thinking about Will laying in bed all day when he could've been outside with Jonathan or biking around town. He wasn't distracting himself from Mike's departure, he was marinating in it.

"We've tried to build blanket forts in my room before, remember? It's not 'structurally sound'," Will points out. Mike shrugs.

"Nothing's *impossible*," he stresses, the soft smile never leaving his face, even when he realized Will's very apparent sadness today. Will's, however, slips and falls and is replaced with a considering frown. As soon as it does, Mike misses it.

"It feels like it sometimes..." Will whispers harshly, looking away again. This time, he looks at his desk, filled with paper ripped out from his sketchbook adorned with half-finished paintings and his watercolor set that Joyce got him for Hanukkah one year after the attacks.

"Feelings aren't always conducive to reality. Isn't that what you told me your therapist said?" Mike implores gently. Will nods, biting his lip quickly before releasing it. He looks back at Mike.

"What are you doing here, Mike?" It's a useless question. They both know the answer, but it seems like Will needs to hear him say it anyway, so he does.

"To say goodbye." Will's body begins shaking again, but this time it's so much so that's he's nearly vibrating. He lets out a small noise that sounds wounded. Mike's heart cleaves in two inside his chest at the sound. It was already hanging on by a thread all summer at the idea of leaving his friends, familiarity and Will behind. But with Will's face looking so devastated, Mike wonders if he will ever repair himself.

"Yeah?" Will asks, voice quivering and then breaking. Mike has a sad smile on his face and his eyebrows pinch in. He moves some of Will's hair out of his face delicately. Will closes his eyes.

“Yeah.” He wants his tone to be strong, wants to be a pillar for Will, but he’s not. He’s not strong and his bravery is slipping the closer it gets to tomorrow and he’s certainly no pillar for anyone, least of all himself. His voice comes out in a choked whisper. His hand travels down Will’s temple and touches his cheek. He begins counting all the beauty marks there to ground himself. One. Two. Three. Four. Will opens his eyes and when he looks at Mike, they’re burning, not at all cooled by the tears inside them. Mike forgets what he was doing and looks back, as he always does.

“You sure?” Will asks with a watery smile. “You sure you have to?” He seems to shrink further into the bed out of embarrassment that he’s even asked that question, like he wants to melt into the wall that’s propping up his back. Mike lets out a soft oh and does what he would’ve done before any of his feelings were realized: he touches Will’s hand that lays shaking in his lap. He knows now that what he really wants to do is fling himself into Will’s space, hold on for dear life and beg him to not let him go, to chain him to Will’s bed and make sure neither of them are ever farther away than right next to each other ever again. But Mike knows that’s not realistic. And more than that, he doesn’t think that’s what Will wants. Mike will go to the ends of the earth to do whatever Will wants. So, instead, he touches Will’s hand softly, gently, full of all the fondness and kindness he has inside him that could only ever be directed towards Will Byers.

But Will has other plans. Will doesn’t want kindness. He wants what he doesn’t realize Mike is holding back: he wants to clutch desperately at the edges of him until they’re inseparable, until no one knows which one of them is which, until they are no longer Mike and Will but instead MikeandWill like he’s wanted as violently and dangerously as Will Byers can manage being for years, longer than either of them are even aware of. So, Will does the only thing he thinks he’s allowed to do: he holds on. He rearranges their hands so that they’re tangled together and Will is clutching onto his fingers for dear life, thinking that’s all he is allowed, all he’ll ever be allowed, so he might as well take it while he has it. While Mike is still here.

Mike stares at their joined hands for a while before looking back at Will’s face and, for once, Will is the one looking at him before Mike is. Will seems to be searching for something that he doesn’t know if

Mike has, if anyone has, and Mike must have it written etched in his heartbroken features because Will lets out a shuddering breath, one it seems as if he's been holding in for years, and Mike can't hold back any longer. Everything that he's been desperately wishing for without even knowing it, all the years of looking at Will and wondering if he's looking back, they were all so plainly expressed in that one despairing sigh. Mike prays to a God he doesn't believe in that Will never leaves him again and untangles their fingers quickly so he can pitch himself into Will's arms. He gets up on his knees and crowds Will's space, holding onto him with all the power and might he has left in him.

Will's eyebrows rise and his mouth opens in shock from his place on Mike's shoulder. His hands flutter in his lap, unsure of what to do. But then he hears Mike let out a sigh of relief at being able to finally hold him, and Will works solely on the instinct he's been suppressing for so long. He wraps his arms around Mike's back and holds on as tightly as he can.

They clutch onto each other for so long, Will feels himself start to tear up. Is this the last time he'll be able to do this? Mike doesn't want to come home for the holidays, he told him so. Mike's going to be in New York City and Will's going to be here. Close enough to home that he could drive if he needed to. Driving to Mike, though? That's out of the question. They're going to be over a thousand miles away from each other. Will's tears fall silently thinking about this, and it's not the first time he's cried about having to be separated from Mike, but it is the first time he's cried in front of him about it.

Will has been trying desperately to hide how scared he is that he and Mike will be halfway across the country from each other because if Mike is scared, he hasn't been showing it. Mike has been spending a lot of time with the party members all summer; almost every spare moment he's had has been spent with them in some combination or another. But the times he spends with just Will have been the normal, hot summer days they've always spent together. Watching movies and eating stale chips with two metal fans whirring in their faces late into the night; nothing out of the ordinary for Mike and Will. But what Will doesn't know is Mike's growing trepidation at the idea of leaving Will behind.

The two boys have not been separated since the eighth grade for

more than a few days at a time, and even on those days, Mike worries intensely, afraid Will has been having nightmares or flashbacks again and he isn't there to calm him down. Will once told Mike he has a special knack at helping him out of his panic attacks, so, since then, Mike has taken that honor very seriously and has done everything he can to bring Will peace.

The insurmountable, suppressing weight of all his fears when it comes to Will come crashing down around him as he clutches his back. What if Will has a panic attack in class, or in his dorm room, and no one is around to help him? Mike will no longer be a walkie-talkie call away. He will be *far*. Too far.

Mike may not have been showing it before, but Will knows now that he's scared. He can't not be with the words suddenly pouring out of his mouth.

"Will, I don't wanna leave. I want to stay here. I made a mistake applying to schools so far away, I -- " Mike cuts himself off, shaking his head. And then he whispers something that makes Will's soothing hand on Mike's back stop dead in its tracks. "We should've gone together."

"...We should've?" Will asks, and can't find it in himself to be embarrassed by how wrecked his whisper comes out.

Mike nods fiercely. "I don't wanna be alone. I-I don't wanna be without you."

"You mean all of us. El and Lucas and Dustin and Max, you don't want to be separated from your -- "

"No. You." Mike gathers Will even closer so that there's not a breath of space between their torsos, and Will realizes not at all for the first time how strong Mike is, inside and out. Mike is crumbling at the thought of losing him too, but his voice is firm and his hold on Will is tight and unmoving. Will feels absolutely light-headed with the knowledge that Mike doesn't want to be without him.

"Why me?" Will's voice is small as he asks this, terrified of the any host of answers he could receive, but he needs to know. He needs to

know why Mike has been spending all his free time with Will this summer, he needs to know what this hug means, he needs to be told by Mike that they are friends and nothing more so he can stop his damned, fruitless wishing.

A half-smile ghosts across Mike's features, pulling one side of his mouth up as he realizes that Will has no idea how deeply their relationship runs for Mike. It makes sense; Mike didn't have a word for it until a few weeks ago. But he knows now, after months, maybe even years of processing that you can like both boys and girls, that he likes Will. He certainly doesn't like him the way he liked El. He and El were something different than he and Will will ever be: puppy love. What Mike feels for Will is the same fierce protectiveness he feels for El, even still now that they've long since broken up, but it burns brighter in him. It doesn't sit in his stomach and eat him alive the way it did with El, but instead lives inside his heart, a place that can hold as much flame and brimstone as the world can carry and still beat just as strongly. He feels powerful in Will's presence in a way he does with no one else.

Mike would do absolutely anything for his friends; he would jump off a cliff to save any of them, and he has proven that inarguably and quite literally before. But Mike tore apart the universe searching for Will when he went missing, drove himself crazy over it in a way he hadn't done before and hasn't done since. When El went missing, he did not search high and low, not because he didn't want to, but because his depression resigned him to the fate that El had died trying to save them that night in the school. But even when faced with the physical, tangible proof in the form of a dead body fished out of the quarry that Will had died, he still refused to believe it. He still searched. He wouldn't let the depression that has been lingering at the edges of his consciousness for longer than he can quantify overtake him. He had to find Will. He couldn't be without him. He couldn't accept a world without Will Byers.

And he doesn't accept it now.

"Why you?" Mike asks, the smile apparent in his voice. His fingers fit in between the notches of Will's spine and that makes his smile grow even further at how well they have always fit. He's absolutely certain and not at all scared of the outcome of what he's about to say,

despite the fact that everything they've built together could come crashing down if it's not accepted or reciprocated. "Because you're the perwin I can't live without."

Mike says it as if it's a fact of the universe, as natural as living and dying, and Will believes him. A tear falls off his cheek and soaks into Mike's shirt as he shifts so that he's laying down. He pulls Mike with him and Mike goes willingly, would follow Will anywhere, and lays down beside him, still intertwined.

"I know the feeling," Will says, smiling now, too.

They stay silent for a long while, simply content to hold each other, minds both in overdrive, until Will quietly breaks.

"What are you thinking?" he asks, and it squeaks out of him, as if he's tearing the words from his vocal cords unwillingly. Mike smiles into Will's shoulder.

"Probably something similar to you."

"Oh, I'm not so sure about that," Will laughs awkwardly. Mike picks his head up and looks at Will, faces closer than they've ever been when they're awake. Will notices his eyes, a dark chocolate brown, have an almost otherworldly quality to them, but instead of make him nervous, like all things occult do nowadays, it makes him feel safe. His eyes are a familiar world that Will has explored hundreds of times over. They're a safe place to hide when the world gets too hard, and Will has never particularly felt safe in hiding. Not since he was 12. But Mike's eyes remind him of Castle Byers, unscathed in this world, a sign out front that hails *HOME OF WILL THE WISE -- ALL FRIENDS WELCOME!* and Will wonders how Mike can do that. How can he make himself a friend to anyone who wants him? Will hopes he will gain so many new relationships in college, but secretly hopes no one finds a home in his eyes the way Will has.

"Well, then, why don't you tell me what you're thinking," Mike says, propping his chin on Will's chest. Will wonders if Mike ever did this with El, if they were ever this close. Will isn't sure anyone has ever been this close to him, emotionally and physically. He always thought he'd be uncomfortable with this kind of contact. However, he

also always thought he'd have to be this close to someone if they were a woman. Mike is very much not a woman and the thought excites him and terrifies him in equal measure. Will wishes he could close the small gap between their mouths and unconsciously glances down at Mike's lips before tearing his eyes away once he realizes what he's done. He licks his own lips nervously, and then turns his head out of embarrassment. Mike simply smiles at him.

"Yeah?" Mike asks quietly, as if he didn't need any words to pass between them to know what Will was trying to express. Will has always been quiet and Mike has always known how to read him. It is a fact of their relationship that Will realizes now he should've been aware of. Will blushes fiercely and screws his eyes shut, wishing again that he could disappear. He can't believe he just incriminated himself like that. Of course he was thinking about kissing Mike; when has he not been thinking about kissing Mike for the last four years? But now, Mike knows he thinks about it, and, Jesus, that's utterly humiliating. Mike is his best friend, and besides that, he's his male, very much straight best friend.

Will has known the slurs thrown at him since they were kids are true for many, many years, and Mike knows the truth because Will told him so. When Will said to Mike in the comfort and security of Castle Byers that he didn't think he wanted to kiss girls, he had simply smiled calmly, the same way he has today, and told him that was okay. He didn't have to. And he hasn't; he hasn't kissed anybody. He's an 18 year old boy who's never had his first kiss, whereas Mike had his when they were just 12. He's always felt like he needs to catch up to the party in this way; all of them have had their first kisses at this point. It's a point of embarrassment for Will, the idea of physical intimacy. He thought whatever intimacy he'd have would be grinned and beared with a girl, even though Mike told him he didn't have to kiss girls if he doesn't want to. He figured if he wanted to be close to someone, it'd have to be with a woman. But Mike is sitting here, holding onto him tightly. This is intimacy, he realizes. This is a closeness he has never felt with anyone before, and it's with a boy. It's with Mike. And it isn't nearly as scary as he thought it would be.

Will forces his rigid body to relax under Mike's touch and wrenches his eyes open. He looks over at Mike, who doesn't look at all teasing.

He looks very fond, soft around the edges, waiting for Will's response patiently, like they have all the time in the world. Will knows they don't. Mike probably has to be home for dinner soon, and then tomorrow morning, so early that he has to wake up at 4 AM, he is off to New York City. The Big Apple. As far away from this hellish town—from Will—as he can get without leaving the country entirely. Will has one chance to not screw this up. He's going to take this chance and run with it.

"Yeah," Will breathes, voice light and higher than he thinks it has any right to be at age 18. It makes him grimace, embarrassed to even exist. Mike's smile grows as he leans imperceptibly closer, enough so that they're now breathing the same air.

"Me, too." Mike's voice is clear and unwavering and Will's eyes widen at this admission. Mike laughs at the shocked expression on Will's face.

"Really?"

Mike nods slowly. "Uh-huh."

"How long?" The question is left open-ended on purpose. *How long have you wanted to? How long have you known you wanted to? How long have you known you're...* Will doesn't finish that thought, doesn't want to put words to a feeling that Mike hasn't even told him directly he has. The fear in Will's eyes is palpable, electric between them, like if they touch now, it'll shock them both. Mike pauses, deliberating on how to answer.

"Long enough," Mike finally says. Will lets out a breath and suddenly doesn't care if the electricity between them shocks and fries them both where they lay. *What a way to go*, Will thinks. He smiles weakly.

"Then, what are you waiting for?" Will's aiming for coy, but it lands somewhere between terrified and desperate. Mike's eyes light up and he smiles again. He shifts slowly, getting up to kneel on either side of Will's torso. His hands are planted on either side of Will's head as he bears down on him, eyes bright and intense. He begins to lean down at a glacially slow pace, but as Will's eyes flutter shut, his voice rings out, overwhelming Will's senses from up close.

"Tell me you want to." Will's eyes snap open and he makes a face at him, pinched and impatient, but underneath it all, more openly nervous than he's been in ages.

"Must I?" Mike looks absolutely gleeful as he nods, his hair brushing against Will's forehead. Will's face morphs into something more serious than as his eyes bore into Mike's. "I want you to kiss me." *I've wanted you to kiss me for so, so long.* He thinks that, loud and clear, but does not admit it for fear of scaring Mike away. Not when he's so close. Not when he doesn't have any time to win him back.

Mike's smile turns gentle at the simple admission, and he touches their foreheads together, closing his eyes. He brushes their noses together, and Will gasps softly, eyes wide and blurred from how close Mike is. Mike hears the sharp intake of breath and his smile grows. He cups Will's face gently and then finally closes the distance between their mouths.

There's no electric shock like Will thought there would be. There's no magic spell broken or fireworks going off in the distance. There's something much better, if you ask Will: there's peace. It's pure, unadulterated affection in Mike's kiss. It's not filled with passion or wild energy like Will thought kisses had to be. It's soft, it's calm, it's an utter and complete lack of fear. Will hasn't felt safe in a long, long time. He doesn't even feel safe in his own skin, not since the monster made its way inside his head and burned his body up from the inside out. But with Mike, he's always felt safe. Mike took care of him when he was here and searched for him when he wasn't. Mike looks out for him. Mike will never hurt him. There is never a reason to be afraid with Mike Wheeler.

Will sighs against Mike's closed lips and wraps a hand delicately around his neck, the other braiding itself into Mike's hair. Will opens his mouth and tries to deepen the kiss as best as he knows how. Mike gets the message and runs his tongue along the edge of Will's bottom lip. Both of Will's hands tighten their hold on Mike and try to pull him closer. However, Mike can feel Will shaking, so he pulls back before they go farther than he knows Will wants to.

Will doesn't let him get very far and holds Mike's face close to his, palms right where they clutch at Mike's jaw. He breathes out harshly

and opens his eyes. Mike sees nothing but trust there, none of the lingering fear he thought he would.

“I thought I told you to *kiss me*, Mike,” Will orders, lightly teasing. But even at the soft tone in Will’s voice, a shiver goes down Mike’s spine. Maybe it was the soft tone that made that happen in the first place, so enormously and entirely Will. Mike is helpless to him, would follow him to the ends of the earth, would do anything he asked of him, so of course he leans down into Will’s space again and licks into his mouth.

Will begins shaking again the moment Mike lightly touches his hip, but he isn’t so sure it’s nerves anymore. Mike thinks maybe this is just Will, this is just part of him. This is the way he kisses. Mike had no idea he still had so much left to learn about Will Byers.

Mike continues kissing him, arched over top of him, no parts of their bodies touching each other except their mouths and hands. This seems unacceptable to Will who removes his hand from Mike’s hair, puts it on the middle of his back and urges him down towards himself. Mike lowers himself down onto Will slowly, careful to not disconnect their mouths, and as their chests touch, Will realizes the enormity of what’s happening. He’s having his first kiss. With a boy. He laughs gently into Mike’s mouth out of disbelief and Mike pulls back an inch, an eyebrow raised, a small smile on his face.

“Something funny, Byers?” Mike questions playfully. Will shakes his head, smiling.

“Just happy.” Mike’s answering grin overtakes his entire face, his eyes crinkling at the corners. The sight takes Will’s breath away every time he sees it, but now that it’s so close to him, Will doesn’t think he’ll ever breathe right again.

“Yeah?” Mike asks, both eyebrows raised now. Will nods.

“Yeah,” he says quietly. “Really, super happy.”

“Oh, good,” Mike breathes as he collapses his weight onto Will completely, arms snaking around his neck. Will laughs, pushing at Mike’s shoulders, but he doesn’t budge.

"You big oaf, get off me! You're gonna crush me!" Mike shakes his head petulantly.

"Nope. You're gonna have to live like this now. I'm never letting you go." The light mood suddenly crashes down around them at the weight of their future, somber and scared of what happens next, tomorrow, the next day.

"That so?" Will asks, but his voice is hollow.

"Yeah. Never letting you go," he repeats, but now the words hold more power and weight than they did the first time he said it. Will doesn't think he's joking around anymore; Mike is scared.

"Hey..." Will soothes, running a hand up Mike's spine over his shirt. "I'm not going anywhere."

"That's not true," Mike laments quietly. "We're both going. We're out of time."

"Don't talk like that, Mike, we're not out of time. We've got all the time in the world, okay? Know why?" Mike shakes his head, but refuses to raise it from where it's buried in the crook of Will's neck. "Because we're *alive*. We fought tooth and nail to stay that way. And because of that, we've got time. Okay?"

Mike does lift his head then, looking at Will with slightly bleary eyes. "Yeah. I guess you're right," he marvels.

Will smiles at him encouragingly and wonders when the roles reversed. It's always been Mike comforting Will, but now, Will feels a bit powerful as he watches the light come back into Mike's eyes. It's a heady thought, that both of them have enough knowledge of the other to help them when they need it the most. It's also sobering, knowing they won't be able to do it much longer.

"Are you scared, Will?" Mike asks, voice smaller than Will's ever heard it. Will smiles sadly.

"Yeah, I'm really scared. Of course I'm scared." He thinks about finishing his thought, but really, all he's been is scared since Mike told him, Lucas and Dustin at lunch back in the spring that he's going

to the New York City College of Technology. All he's been is scared for so long, so he doesn't have anything left to offer up after that.

"Why?" Mike asks.

"Why are you?" Will responds, and Mike shrugs.

"Told you. Not sure if I can live without you," he answers sadly. Will brushes the hair out of Mike's eyes and tries to tuck it behind his ear, but it falls out the second he lifts his hand back to Mike's cheek. He tries not to take it as a metaphor for the fact that they're both falling apart, and no amount of comforting can fix it this time, but he's an artist; metaphors live in his blood.

"You have to. And honestly, Mike, I think you can do anything, with or without me." Mike opens his mouth to argue, but Will keeps going, bowling over whatever he was about to say as a rebuttal. "Really, I mean it. You're... You're a force to be reckoned with. The world didn't know what it was signing up for when it made you." Mike smiles but it falls just as quickly.

"But Will, it's always been me and you. Even before Dustin and Lucas, it was me and you. Since we were five years old. I'm not sure who I am if not a leader or a Dungeon Master or a paladin or... your friend." He collapses into Will's chest after he pushes out the last two words of his sentence and this time, Will doesn't argue, he just allows Mike to take all he has to offer. He runs his hand soothingly over Mike's back and up into his hair, anchoring them together.

"Well, lucky for you, you're never going to have to find out who you are if you're not my friend." Mike can't hold back anymore once Will makes that promise, and he cries into his neck, harder than he has since he got his acceptance letter. Will runs his nails over Mike's scalp and coos soothingly.

"What if I fail?" Mike whispers brokenly.

"You *won't*," Will answers, mustering up all the ferocity he has inside him. "You *won't*."

"But I could. High school was easy for me, Will, but college? It just

keeps getting harder from here. I could -- ” He doesn’t finish his sentence, cutting himself off with a sharp cry.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay. It’s okay if you do and it’s okay if you don’t. We’ll all still be here when you get back.”

“But I told everyone I *wasn’t* coming back,” Mike cries. “That I wanted to get away from this stupid town.”

“Do you?” Will asks, afraid of the answer.

“I do,” he says, and Will tries not to physically deflate. “But there was always one thing keeping me here. Calling me back.”

“Oh, yeah?” Will asks, voice soft so that the watery nature of it doesn’t shine through.

“Mmm. You see, I’ve got these friends...” Mike pulls back and looks at him with a gentle smile, violently wiping his ruddy cheeks with the outside of his wrist. “This one friend in particular. He’s worth more than his own weight in gold and is more talented than anyone else I know.” Will blushes, shaking his head, but doesn’t look away. “He doesn’t even know it, either, but he’s going to get his paintings in The Louvre one day and he’ll take me to Paris when he goes to the opening. He shines, too. Brighter than anyone on earth. He thinks he’s the darkness, all shadows and blindness, but that just makes his light shine even brighter.”

Will smiles back at him shakily, a few tears escaping his eyes and traveling into his hair. *The Louvre*. Mike thinks Will is good enough to be in The Louvre. “He sounds well-matched to you.”

“He is. Softens my rough edges.” Mike leans in and kisses the apple of Will’s cheek, the center of his forehead, his brow, the bridge of his nose, the corner of his mouth. Will closes his eyes.

“Mike,” he sighs, and that’s all it takes for Mike to kiss his mouth. It’s slow and languid, more unhurried than the kiss before it. Mike kisses Will like he’s got time to, like the clock isn’t ticking, like time has stopped for them. Will thinks if anyone could stop time, it’d be Mike Wheeler. Mike kisses his upper lip gently, tangling his fingers in the

fine hairs at the base of Will's skull, and Will wishes they had any time to do any of the things he knows he wants to. He wants to go on dates with Mike, hold his hand in front of his mother... Will wants to fall in love. He knows he could. He feels like he already has, as if these kisses are just the culmination, the finish line of their journey together. He hopes there's other races to run. He doesn't know if there's any way for that to happen anymore. Maybe they've wasted all their time, maybe Mike was right, but he hopes. He hopes they can find a way.

Will doesn't realize he's crying until Mike pulls away, worry written all over his expression, and thumbs at Will's cheeks and temples, brushing away the tears.

"Don't cry, sunshine. It's okay." Will screws his eyes shut and sobs at the name. *Sunshine*. That's how Mike sees him. He sees him as light incarnate. Will doesn't know how he can live up to the beautiful things Mike sees him as, if he'll ever be in The Louvre, if he'll ever stop feeling as if he's succumbed to the darkness.

"It doesn't feel okay. It feels like the darkness is creeping in again. It feels like all my fears and anxieties..." Will trails off and opens his eyes to look at Mike who looks devastated, broken and splintered straight down the middle. "You're *leaving*, Mike, and you're not coming back." Mike winces. "Are you?"

"I don't know," he whispers. "You make me happy, Will. I don't want to lose that."

"How can you not?" Will asks quietly, the question genuine and not leading. Mike looks away nervously, more unsure than Mike Wheeler ever has the right to be. Will knows Mike to be a creature of bravery, of impulsivity and recklessness and never hesitating. To see him that way now is a bit jarring, and it shocks him into wondering what on earth he could possibly be nervous about.

"We could..." He trails off, terrified to finish his sentence. *Come on, Wheeler*, he chastises. *You've done this before. The stakes were lower then, maybe, the outcome more certain, but you've done it before.* "We could date."

Will looks at him, dumbfounded. "We could? Like... You wanna be more than friends?"

Mike shakes his head resolutely. "Not more. Our friendship is the best thing in my life; I don't think anything could ever be more than it, even a romantic relationship. I don't want to lose our friendship. Ever."

"I don't either. I don't think that's what I meant. I guess... different than friends, then?"

"Yeah. Different than friends. Boyfriends, maybe," Mike smiles.

"You want that?" Will marvels. "You want a... boyfriend?" And Mike knows exactly what he's asking.

"Well, I won't take just any," he teases. "Only you."

"Mike--"

"Yes. I want... I like... both," he says trepidatiously, searching Will's face for any sign of disapproval. He hasn't told anyone about his feelings towards different genders, but he figures the object of his affections and best friend on earth is a good place to start.

"Really? I... I didn't know. I thought you just liked girls."

"I did, too. I didn't know there was any other option, really." Will's eyebrows raise slightly in wonder.

"Me neither." He looks at Mike and smiles. "I'm glad you told me. This is big."

"Yeah," Mike breathes. "I guess it is."

"Have you told anyone else?" Mike shakes his head.

"No one else to tell." Will's smile grows at that and he delicately runs the pads of his fingers over Mike's cheekbone.

"And you want to... be with me?" Will asks softly, voice full of wonder.

“Yeah. I do. I really, really do.” Mike pauses. “Do you... wanna be with me?”

Will nods so hard, he bumps his forehead against Mike's. They both laugh. “Yes. Very much, yes.”

Mike laughter fades into a fond smile. “So it's settled then. Boyfriends.”

“Yeah...” Will murmurs. “Boyfriends.”

“I've...” Mike glances at the clock and deflates at what he sees. “I'm sorry, sunshine, but I've gotta get going. I promised my mother I'd be home for dinner.” Will nods.

“Okay,” he whispers. Neither of them make any moves to untangle themselves. “I guess this is goodbye, then.”

“Not goodbye. Not for long. I have to get back home and see my *boyfriend* soon. Will you be around?” Mike asks, a teasing smile ghosting over his features, and Will's face lights up.

“You mean it? You wanna come home for the holidays?” Mike nods.

“Maybe even Thanksgiving, too, if my mom will pay for the plane ticket.” Will squeals and wraps his arms around Mike's neck excitedly and tugs him down so that he crashes into Will's body. He lets out a soft *oof* and then laughs, snaking his arms around Will's waist and cupping his hips in his palms. They smile into each other's necks for a long moment. Mike kisses Will's neck gently where his lips lay resting. It's full of promise, excitement and so much hope.

“Okay, get going or I'll chain you to my bed and never let you leave,” Will says, pushing at Mike's shoulders. Mike pulls back, his eyebrow raised.

“That doesn't sound half bad, Byers,” he teases, winking dramatically. Will shivers at his tone, but laughs anyway.

“Get off me before your mother comes over and barges in here.” Mike grimaces.

“She would, too. She’s been awfully clingy since I told her I wasn’t going to be home for the holidays.” Will smiles at him.

“Well, you’ve gotta wish your boyfriend a Happy Hanukkah in person, don’t you?” Mike smiles back, and it’s absolutely luminous. Will thinks if he shines the way Mike says he does, then Mike must be an outlet, a power source, giving him the strength to be able to.

“Okay...” Mike climbs off of Will and ambles up towards the door and opens it. He looks back at Will and there’s a hint of nervousness in his eyes. “I’ll see you soon, right, Will?”

“Right. No goodbyes.”

“No goodbyes,” Mike smiles, waving in the doorway. Will smiles back.

They’ve got time.

Author's Note:

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